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NEIL GAIMAN'S LIKELY STORIES

FOUR SHORT STORIES, AS SEEN ON TV

NEIL GAIMAN'S LIKELY STORIES

Neil Gaiman

headline

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‘Foreign Parts’ and ‘Looking For The Girl’ first published *Smoke and Mirrors* (Headline, 1999). ‘Feeders & Eaters’ and ‘Closing Time’ first published in *Fragile Things* (Headline, 2006).

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About Neil Gaiman

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Neil Gaiman is the author of over thirty acclaimed books and graphic novels for adults and children, including AMERICAN GODS, STARDUST, CORALINE, THE GRAVEYARD BOOK and TRIGGER WARNING: SHORT FICTIONS AND DISTURBANCES. His most recent novel for adults, THE OCEAN AT THE END OF THE LANE was highly acclaimed, appeared on the hardback and paperback *Sunday Times* bestseller lists and won several awards, including being voted Book of the Year in the National Book Awards 2013: 'Some books you read. Some books you enjoy. But some books just swallow you up, heart and soul' Joanne Harris.

The recipient of numerous literary honours, Neil Gaiman's work has been adapted for film, television and radio. He has written scripts for *Doctor Who*, collaborated with authors and illustrators including Terry Pratchett, Dave McKean and Chris Riddell, and THE SANDMAN is established as one of the classic graphic novels. As George R. R.

Martin says: ‘There’s no one quite like Neil Gaiman.’

Originally from England, Neil Gaiman now lives in America.

@neilhimself

Praise for Neil Gaiman:

‘His mind is a dark, fathomless ocean, and every time I sink into it, this world fades, replaced by one far more terrible and beautiful in which I will happily drown’ *New York Times Book Review*

‘One of the best fabulists of our age’ *Financial Times*

‘He’s the master of fantasy and realism twisted together’ Hugo Rifkind, *Spectator*

‘A very fine and imaginative writer’ *The Sunday Times*

‘A rich imagination . . . and an ability to tackle large themes’ Philip Pullman

‘Gaiman’s achievement is to make the fantasy world seem true’ *The Times*

‘A power that defies explanation’ *Sunday Express*

‘Slots perfectly into the canon of British magical fiction’ *New Statesman*

‘Fantasy rooted in the darkest corners of reality’ *Independent on Sunday*

‘Gaiman is a master of fear, and he understands the nature of fairytales’ A S Byatt, *Guardian*

About the book

‘Let me tell you a story. No, wait, one’s not enough. I’ll begin again . . .’

Characteristically dark and strange, these four short stories were originally published in Neil Gaiman’s popular short-story collections, *Fragile Things* and *Smoke and Mirrors*

‘Foreign Parts’, a story of loneliness and identity, and, perhaps, the joys of making your own way in the world.

‘Feeders & Eaters’, an eerie tale drawn from a nightmare the author had in his twenties.

‘Closing Time’, a ghostly story within a story, whispered in the quiet of the night.

‘Looking For The Girl’, a tale that spans a lifetime, originally commissioned by Penthouse for their 20th anniversary issue.

By Neil Gaiman and published by Headline

The View from the Cheap Seats
Trigger Warning
The Ocean at the End of the Lane
Fragile Things
Anansi Boys
American Gods
Stardust
Smoke and Mirrors
Neverwhere

How the Marquis Got His Coat Back *(A* Neverwhere *short story)*

The Truth is a Cave in the Black Mountains *(illustrated by Eddie Campbell)*

Mirror Mask: The Illustrated Film Script
(with Dave McKean)

Foreign Parts

> The VENEREAL DISEASE is disease contracted as a consequence of impure connexion. The fearful constitutional consequences which may result from this affection, – consequences, the fear of which may haunt the mind for years, which may taint the whole springs of health, and be transmitted to circulate in the young blood of innocent offspring, – are indeed terrible considerations, too terrible not to render the disease one of those which must unhesitatingly be placed under medical care.
>
> *– SPENCER THOMAS, M.D., L.R.C.S. (EDIN.), A DICTIONARY OF DOMESTIC MEDICINE AND HOUSEHOLD SURGERY, 1882*

Simon Powers didn't like sex. Not really.

He disliked having someone else in the same bed as himself; he suspected that he came too soon; he always felt uncomfortably that his performance was in some way being graded, like a driving test or a practical examination.

He had got laid in college a few times and once, three years ago, after the office New Year's party. But that had been that, and as far as Simon was concerned, he was well out of it.

It occurred to him once, during a slack time at the office, that he would have liked to have lived in the days of Queen Victoria, where well-brought-up women were no more than resentful sex dolls in the bedroom: they'd unlace their stays, loosen their petticoats (revealing pinkish-white flesh) then lie back and suffer the indignities of the carnal act – an indignity it would never even occur to them that they were meant to enjoy.

He filed it away for later, another masturbatory fantasy.

Simon masturbated a great deal. Every night – sometimes more than that if he was unable to sleep. He could take as long, or as short, a time to climax as he wished. And in his mind he had had them all. Film and television stars; women from the office; schoolgirls; the naked models who pouted from the crumpled pages of *Fiesta*; faceless slaves in chains; tanned boys with bodies like Greek gods . . .

Night after night they paraded in front of him.

It was safer that way.

In his mind.

And afterward he'd fall asleep, comfortable and safe in a world he controlled, and he'd sleep without dreaming. Or at least, he never remembered his dreams in the morning.

The morning it started he was woken by the radio ('Two hundred killed and many others believed to be injured; and now over to Jack for the weather and traffic news . . .'), dragged himself out of bed, and stumbled, bladder aching, into the bathroom.

He pulled up the toilet seat and urinated. It felt like he was pissing needles.

He needed to urinate again after breakfast – less painfully, since the flow was not as heavy – and three more times before lunch.

Each time it hurt.

He told himself that it couldn't be a venereal disease. That was something that other people got, and something (he thought of his last sexual encounter, three years in the past) that you got from other people. You couldn't really catch it from toilet seats, could you? Wasn't that just a joke?

Simon Powers was twenty-six, and he worked in a large London bank, in the securities division. He had few friends at work. His only real friend, Nick Lawrence, a lonely Canadian, had recently transferred to another branch, and Simon sat by himself in the staff canteen, staring out at the Docklands Lego landscape, picking at a limp green salad.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder.

'Simon, I heard a good one today. Wanna hear?' Jim Jones was the office clown, a dark-haired, intense young man who claimed he had a special pocket on his boxer shorts, for condoms.

'Um. Sure.'

'Here you go. What's the collective noun for people who work in banks?'

'The what?'

'Collective noun. You know, like a flock of sheep, a pride of lions. Give up?'

Simon nodded.

'A wunch of bankers.'

Simon must have looked puzzled, because Jim sighed and said, 'Wunch of bankers. *Bunch of wankers*. God, you're slow . . .' Then, spotting a group of young women at a far table, Jim straightened his tie and carried his tray over to them.

He could hear Jim telling his joke to the women, this time with added hand movements.

They all got it immediately.

Simon left his salad on the table and went back to work.

That night he sat in his chair in his bedsitter flat with the television

turned off, and he tried to remember what he knew about venereal diseases.

There was syphilis, which pocked your face and drove the Kings of England mad; gonorrhoea – the clap – a green oozing and more madness; crabs, little pubic lice, which nested and itched (he inspected his pubic hairs through a magnifying glass, but nothing moved); AIDS, the eighties plague, a plea for clean needles and safer sexual habits (but what could be safer than a clean wank for one into a fresh handful of white tissues?); herpes, which had something to do with cold sores (he checked his lips in the mirror, they looked fine). That was all he knew.

And he went to bed and fretted himself to sleep, without daring to masturbate.

That night he dreamed of tiny women with blank faces, walking in endless rows between gargantuan office blocks, like an army of soldier ants.

Simon did nothing about the pain for another two days. He hoped it would go away, or get better on its own. It didn't. It got worse. The pain continued for up to an hour after urination; his penis felt raw and bruised inside.

And on the third day, he phoned his doctor's surgery to make an appointment. He had dreaded having to tell the woman who answered the phone what the problem was, and so he was relieved, and perhaps just a little disappointed, when she didn't ask but simply made an appointment for the following day.

He told his senior at the bank that he had a sore throat and would need to see the doctor about it. He could feel his cheeks burn as he told her, but she did not remark on this, merely told him that that would be fine.

When he left her office, he found that he was shaking.

It was a grey wet day when he arrived at the doctor's surgery. There was no queue, and he went straight in to the doctor. Not his regular doctor, Simon was comforted to see. This was a young Pakistani, of about Simon's age, who interrupted Simon's stammered recitation of symptoms to ask:

'Urinating more than usual, are we?'

Simon nodded.

'Any discharge?'

Simon shook his head.

'Right ho. I'd like you to take down your trousers, if you don't mind.'

Simon took them down. The doctor peered at his penis. 'You do have a discharge, you know,' he said.

Simon did himself up again.

‘Now, Mr Powers, tell me, do you think it possible that you might have picked up from someone, a, uh, venereal disease?’

Simon shook his head vigorously. ‘I haven’t had sex with anyone—’ he had almost said ‘anyone else’ ‘—in almost three years.’

‘No?’ The doctor obviously didn’t believe him. He smelled of exotic spices and had the whitest teeth Simon had ever seen. ‘Well, you have either contracted gonorrhoea or NSU. Probably NSU: nonspecific urethritis. Which is less famous and less painful than gonorrhoea, but it can be a bit of an old bastard to treat. You can get rid of gonorrhoea with one big dose of antibiotics. Kills the bugger off . . .’ He clapped his hands twice. Loudly. ‘Just like that.’

‘You don’t know, then?’

‘Which one it is? Good Lord, no. I’m not even going to try to find out. I’m sending you to a special clinic, which takes care of all of that kind of thing. I’ll give you a note to take with you.’ He pulled a pad of headed notepaper from a drawer. ‘What is your profession, Mr Powers?’

‘I work in a bank.’

‘A teller?’

‘No.’ He shook his head. ‘I’m in securities. I clerk for two assistant managers.’ A thought occurred to him. ‘They don’t have to know about this, do they?’

The doctor looked shocked. ‘Good gracious, no.’

He wrote a note, in a careful, round handwriting, stating that Simon Powers, age twenty-six, had something that was probably NSU. He had a discharge. Said he had had no sex for three years. In discomfort. Please could they let him know the results of the tests. He signed it with a squiggle. Then he handed Simon a card with the address and phone number of the special clinic on it. ‘Here you are. This is where you go. Not to worry – happens to lots of people. See all the cards I have here? Not to worry – you’ll soon be right as rain. Phone them when you get home and make an appointment.’

Simon took the card and stood up to go.

‘Don’t worry,’ said the doctor. ‘It won’t prove difficult to treat.’

Simon nodded and tried to smile.

He opened the door to go out.

‘And, at any rate, it’s nothing really nasty, like syphilis,’ said the doctor.

The two elderly women sitting outside in the hallway waiting area looked up delightedly at this fortuitous overheard, and stared hungrily at Simon as he walked away.

He wished he were dead.

On the pavement outside, waiting for the bus home, Simon thought: *I’ve* got a venereal disease. I’ve *got* a venereal disease. I’ve got a

venereal disease. Over and over, like a mantra.

He should toll a bell as he walked.

On the bus he tried not to get too close to his fellow passengers. He was certain they knew (couldn't they read the plague marks on his face?); and at the same time he was ashamed he was forced to keep it a secret from them.

He got back to the flat and went straight into the bathroom, expecting to see a decayed horror-movie face, a rotting skull fuzzy with blue mould, staring back at him from the mirror. Instead, he saw a pink-cheeked bank clerk in his mid-twenties, fair-haired, perfect-skinned.

He fumbled out his penis and scrutinised it with care. It was neither a gangrenous green nor a leprous white, but looked perfectly normal, except for the slightly swollen tip and the clear discharge that lubricated the hole. He realised that his white underpants had been stained across the crotch by the leak.

Simon felt angry with himself and angrier with God for having given him a (say it) (*dose of the clap*) obviously meant for someone else.

He masturbated that night for the first time in four days.

He fantasised a schoolgirl in blue cotton panties who changed into a policewoman, then two policewomen, then three.

It didn't hurt at all until he climaxed; then he felt as if someone were pushing a switchblade through the inside of his cock. As if he were ejaculating a pincushion.

He began to cry then in the darkness, but whether from the pain, or from some other reason, less easy to identify, even Simon was unsure.

That was the last time he masturbated.

* * *

The clinic was located in a dour Victorian hospital in central London. A young man in a white coat looked at Simon's card, and took his doctor's note, and told him to take a seat.

Simon sat down on an orange plastic chair covered with brown cigarette burns.

He stared at the floor for a few minutes. Then, having exhausted that form of entertainment, he stared at the walls, and finally, having no other option, at the other people.

They were all male, thank God – women were on the next floor up – and there were more than a dozen of them.

The most comfortable were the macho building-site types, here for their seventeenth or seventieth time, looking rather pleased with

themselves, as if whatever they had caught were proof of their virility. There were a few city gents in ties and suits. One of them looked relaxed; he carried a mobile telephone. Another, hiding behind a *Daily Telegraph*, was blushing, embarrassed to be there; there were little men with wispy moustaches and tatty raincoats – newspaper sellers, perhaps, or retired teachers; a rotund Malaysian gentleman who chain-smoked filterless cigarettes, lighting each cigarette from the butt of the one before, so the flame never went out, but was transmitted from one dying cigarette to the next. In one corner sat a scared gay couple. Neither of them looked more than eighteen. This was obviously their first appointment as well, the way they kept glancing around. They were holding hands, white-knuckled and discreetly. They were terrified.

Simon felt comforted. He felt less alone.

'Mister Powers, please,' said the man at the desk. Simon stood up, conscious that all eyes were upon him, that he'd been identified and named in front of all these people. A cheerful, red-haired doctor in a white coat was waiting.

'Follow me,' he said.

They walked down some corridors, through a door (on which DR. J. BENHAM was written in felt pen on a white sheet of paper scotch-taped to the frosted glass), into a doctor's office.

'I'm Doctor Benham,' said the doctor. He didn't offer to shake hands. 'You have a note from your doctor?'

'I gave it to the man at the desk.'

'Oh.' Dr Benham opened a file on the desk in front of him. There was a computer printout label on the side. It said:

REG'D 2 JLY 90. MALE. 90/00666.L
POWERS, SIMON, MR.
BORN 12 OCT 63. SINGLE.

Benham read the note, looked at Simon's penis, and handed him a sheet of blue paper from the file. It had the same label, stuck to the top.

'Take a seat in the corridor,' he told him. 'A nurse will collect you.'

Simon waited in the corridor.

'They're very fragile,' said the sunburnt man sitting next to him, by accent a South African or perhaps Zimbabwean. Colonial accent, at any rate.

'I'm sorry?'

'Very fragile. Venereal diseases. Think about it. You can catch a cold or flu simply by being in the same room as someone who's got it. Venereal diseases need warmth and moisture, and intimate contact.'

Not mine, thought Simon, but he didn't say anything.

‘You know what I’m dreading?’ said the South African.

Simon shook his head.

‘Telling my wife,’ said the man, and he fell silent.

A nurse came and took Simon away. She was young and pretty, and he followed her into a cubicle. She took the blue slip of paper from him.

‘Take off your jacket and roll up your right sleeve.’

‘My jacket?’

She sighed. ‘For the blood test.’

‘Oh.’

The blood test was almost pleasant, compared to what came next.

‘Take down your trousers,’ she told him. She had a marked Australian accent. His penis had shrunk, tightly pulled in on itself; it looked grey and wrinkled. He found himself wanting to tell her that it was normally much larger, but then she picked up a metal instrument with a wire loop at the end, and he wished it were even smaller. ‘Squeeze your penis at the base and push forward a few times.’ He did so. She stuck the loop into the head of his penis and twisted it around the inside. He winced at the pain. She smeared the discharge onto a glass slide. Then she pointed to a glass jar on a shelf. ‘Can you urinate into that for me, please?’

‘What, from here?’

She pursed her lips. Simon suspected that she must have heard that joke thirty times a day since she had been working there.

She went out of the cubicle and left him alone to pee.

Simon found it difficult to pee at the best of times, often having to wait around in toilets until all the people had gone. He envied men who could casually walk into toilets, unzip, and carry on cheerful conversations with their neighbours in the adjoining urinal, all the while showering the white porcelain with yellow urine. Often he couldn’t do it at all.

He couldn’t do it now.

The nurse came in again. ‘No luck? Not to worry. Take a seat back in the waiting room, and the doctor will call you in a minute.’

‘Well,’ said Dr Benham. ‘You have NSU. Nonspecific urethritis.’

Simon nodded, and then he said, ‘What does that mean?’

‘It means you don’t have gonorrhoea, Mister Powers.’

‘But I haven’t had sex with, with anyone, for . . .’

‘Oh, that’s nothing to worry about. It can be a quite spontaneous disease – you need not, um, indulge, to pick it up.’ Benham reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of pills. ‘Take one of these four times a day before meals. Stay off alcohol, no sex, and don’t drink milk for a couple of hours after taking one. Got it?’

Simon grinned nervously.

‘I’ll see you next week. Make an appointment downstairs.’

Downstairs they gave him a red card with his name on and the time of his appointment. It also had a number on: 90/00666.L.

Walking home in the rain, Simon paused outside a travel agents’. The poster in the window showed a beach in the sun and three bronzed women in bikinis, sipping long drinks.

Simon had never been abroad.

Foreign places made him nervous.

As the week went on, the pain went away; and four days later Simon found himself able to urinate without flinching.

Something else was happening, however.

It began as a tiny seed, which took root in his mind, and grew. He told Dr Benham about it at his next appointment.

Benham was puzzled.

‘You’re saying that you don’t feel your penis is your own anymore, then, Mister Powers?’

‘That’s right, Doctor.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t quite follow you. Is there some kind of loss of sensation?’

Simon could feel his penis inside his trousers, felt the sensation of cloth against flesh. In the darkness it began to stir.

‘Not at all. I can feel everything like I always could. It’s just it feels . . . well, different, I suppose. Like it isn’t really part of me anymore. Like it . . .’ He paused. ‘Like it belongs to someone else.’

Dr Benham shook his head. ‘To answer your question, Mr Powers, that isn’t a symptom of NSU – although it’s a perfectly valid psychological reaction for someone who has contracted it. A, uh, feeling of disgust with yourself, perhaps, which you’ve externalized as a rejection of your genitalia.’

That sounds about right, thought Dr Benham. He hoped he had got the jargon correct. He had never paid much attention to his psychology lectures or textbooks, which might explain, or so his wife maintained, why he was currently serving out a stint in a London VD clinic.

Powers looked a little soothed.

‘I was just a bit worried, Doctor, that’s all.’ He chewed his lower lip. ‘Um, what exactly *is* NSU?’

Benham smiled, reassuringly. ‘Could be any one of a number of things. NSU is just our way of saying we don’t know exactly what it is. It’s not gonorrhoea. It’s not chlamydia. ‘Nonspecific,’ you see. It’s an infection, and it responds to antibiotics. Which reminds me . . .’ He opened a desk drawer and took out a new week’s supply.

‘Make an appointment downstairs for next week. No sex. No alcohol.’

No sex? thought Simon. *Not bloody likely*.

But when he walked past the pretty Australian nurse in the corridor, he felt his penis begin to stir again, begin to get warm and to harden.

* * *

Benham saw Simon the following week. Tests showed he still had the disease.

Benham shrugged.

'It's not unusual for it to hang on for this long. You say you feel no discomfort?'

'No. None at all. And I haven't seen any discharge, either.'

Benham was tired, and a dull pain throbbed behind his left eye. He glanced down at the tests in the folder. 'You've still got it, I'm afraid.'

Simon Powers shifted his seat. He had large watery blue eyes and a pale unhappy face. 'What about the other thing, Doctor?'

The doctor shook his head. 'What other thing?'

'I *told* you,' said Simon. 'Last week. I *told* you. The feeling that my, um, my penis wasn't, isn't *my* penis anymore.'

Of course, thought Benham. *It's* that *patient*. There was never any way he could remember the procession of names and faces and penises, with their awkwardness, and their braggadocio, and their sweaty nervous smells, and their sad little diseases.

'Mm. What about it?'

'It's spreading, Doctor. The whole lower half of my body feels like it's someone else's. My legs and everything. I can feel them, all right, and they go where I want them to go, but sometimes I get the feeling that if they wanted to go somewhere else – if they wanted to go walking off into the world – they could, and they'd take me with them.

'I wouldn't be able to do anything to stop it.'

Benham shook his head. He hadn't really been listening. 'We'll change your antibiotics. If the others haven't knocked this disease out by now, I'm sure these will. They'll probably get rid of this other feeling as well – it's probably just a side effect of the antibiotics.'

The young man just stared at him.

Benham felt he should say something else. 'Perhaps you should try to get out more,' he said.

The young man stood up.

'Same time next week. No sex, no booze, no milk after the pills.' The doctor recited his litany.

The young man walked away. Benham watched him carefully, but could see nothing strange about the way he walked.

* * *

On Saturday night Dr Jeremy Benham and his wife, Celia, attended a dinner party held by a professional colleague. Benham sat next to a foreign psychiatrist.

They began to talk, over the hors d'oeuvres.

'The trouble with telling folks you're a psychiatrist,' said the psychiatrist, who was American, and huge, and bullet-headed, and looked like a merchant marine, 'is you get to watch them trying to act normal for the rest of the evening.' He chuckled, low and dirty.

Benham chuckled, too, and since he was sitting next to a psychiatrist, he spent the rest of the evening trying to act normally.

He drank too much wine with his dinner.

After the coffee, when he couldn't think of anything else to say, he told the psychiatrist (whose name was Marshall, although he told Benham to call him Mike) what he could recall of Simon Powers's delusions.

Mike laughed. 'Sounds fun. Maybe a tiny bit spooky. But nothing to worry about. Probably just a hallucination caused by a reaction to the antibiotics. Sounds a little like Capgras's Syndrome. You heard about that over here?'

Benham nodded, then thought, then said, 'No.' He poured himself another glass of wine, ignoring his wife's pursed lips and almost imperceptibly shaken head.

'Well, Capgras's Syndrome,' said Mike, 'is this funky delusion. Whole piece on it in *The Journal of American Psychiatry* about five years back. Basically, it's where a person believes that the important people in his or her life – family members, workmates, parents, loved ones, whatever – have been replaced by – get this! – exact doubles.

'Doesn't apply to everyone they know. Just selected people. Often just one person in their life. No accompanying delusions, either. Just that one thing. Acutely emotionally disturbed people with paranoid tendencies.'

The psychiatrist picked his nose with his thumbnail. 'I ran into a case myself, couple, two, three years back.'

'Did you cure him?'

The psychiatrist gave Benham a sideways look and grinned, showing all his teeth. 'In psychiatry, Doctor – unlike, perhaps, the world of sexually transmitted disease clinics – there is no such thing as a cure. There is only adjustment.'

Benham sipped the red wine. Later it occurred to him that he would never have said what he said next if it wasn't for the wine. Not aloud, anyway. 'I don't suppose . . .' He paused, remembering a film he had

seen as a teenager. (Something about *bodysnatchers*?) 'I don't suppose that anyone ever checked to see if those people had been removed and replaced by exact doubles . . .?'

Mike – Marshall – whatever – gave Benham a very funny look indeed and turned around in his chair to talk to his neighbour on the other side.

Benham, for his part, carried on trying to act normally (whatever that was) and failed miserably. He got very drunk indeed, started muttering about 'fucking colonials', and had a blazing row with his wife after the party was over, none of which were particularly normal occurrences.

* * *

Benham's wife locked him out of their bedroom after the argument.

He lay on the sofa downstairs, covered by a crumpled blanket, and masturbated into his underpants, his hot seed spurting across his stomach.

In the small hours he was woken by a cold sensation around his loins.

He wiped himself off with his dress shirt and returned to sleep.

* * *

Simon was unable to masturbate.

He wanted to, but his hand wouldn't move. It lay beside him, healthy, fine; but it was as if he had forgotten how to make it respond. Which was silly, wasn't it?

Wasn't it?

He began to sweat. It dripped from his face and forehead onto the white cotton sheets, but the rest of his body was dry.

Cell by cell, something was reaching up inside him. It brushed his face tenderly, like the kiss of a lover; it was licking his throat, breathing on his cheek. Touching him.

He had to get out of the bed. He couldn't get out of the bed.

He tried to scream, but his mouth wouldn't open. His larynx refused to vibrate.

Simon could still see the ceiling, lit by the lights of passing cars. The ceiling blurred: His eyes were still his own, and tears were oozing out of them, down his face, soaking the pillow.

They don't know what I've got, he thought. *They said I had what*

everyone else gets. But I didn't catch that. I've caught something different.

Or maybe, he thought, as his vision clouded over and the darkness swallowed the last of Simon Powers, *it caught me*.

Soon after that, Simon got up, and washed, and inspected himself carefully in front of the bathroom mirror. Then he smiled, as if he liked what he saw.

* * *

Benham smiled. 'I'm pleased to tell you,' he said, 'that I can give you a clean bill of health.'

Simon Powers stretched in his seat, lazily, and nodded. 'I feel terrific,' he said.

He did look well, Benham thought. Glowing with health. He seemed taller as well. A very attractive young man, decided the doctor. 'So, uh, no more of those feelings?'

'Feelings?'

'Those feelings you were telling me about. That your body didn't belong to you anymore.'

Simon waved a hand, gently, fanning his face. The cold weather had broken, and London was stewing in a sudden heatwave; it didn't feel like England anymore.

Simon seemed amused.

'All of this body belongs to me, Doctor. I'm certain of that.'

Simon Powers (90/00666.L SINGLE. MALE.) grinned like the world belonged to him as well.

The doctor watched him as he walked out of the surgery. He looked stronger now, less fragile.

The next patient on Jeremy Benham's appointment card was a twenty-two-year-old boy. Benham was going to have to tell him he was HIV positive. *I hate this job*, he thought. *I need a holiday*.

He walked down the corridor to call the boy in and pushed past Simon Powers, talking animatedly to a pretty young Australian nurse. 'It must be a lovely place,' he was telling her. 'I want to see it. I want to go everywhere. I want to meet *everyone*.' He was resting a hand on her arm, and she was making no move to free herself from it.

Dr Benham stopped beside them. He touched Simon on the shoulder. 'Young man,' he said. 'Don't let me see you back here.'

Simon Powers grinned. 'You won't see me here again, Doctor,' he said. 'Not as such, anyway. I've packed in my job. I'm going around the world.'

They shook hands. Powers's hand was warm and comfortable and dry.

Benham walked away, but could not avoid hearing Simon Powers, still talking to the nurse.

'It's going to be so great,' he was saying to her. Benham wondered if he was talking about sex or world travel, or possibly, in some way, both.

'I'm going to have such *fun*,' said Simon. 'I'm loving it already.'

Feeders and Eaters

This is a true story, pretty much. As far as that goes, and whatever good it does anybody .

It was late one night, and I was cold, in a city where I had no right to be. Not at that time of night, anyway. I won't tell you which city. I'd missed my last train, and I wasn't sleepy, so I prowled the streets around the station until I found an all-night café. Somewhere warm to sit.

You know the kind of place; you've been there: café's name on a Pepsi sign above a dirty plate-glass window, dried egg residue between the tines of all their forks. I wasn't hungry, but I bought a slice of toast and a mug of greasy tea, so they'd leave me alone.

There were a couple of other people in there, sitting alone at their tables, derelicts and insomniacs huddled over their empty plates. Dirty coats and donkey jackets, buttoned-up to the neck.

I was walking back from the counter with my tray when somebody said, 'Hey.' It was a man's voice. 'You,' the voice said, and I knew he was talking to me, not to the room. 'I know you. Come here. Sit over here.'

I ignored it. You don't want to get involved, not with anyone you'd run into in a place like that.

Then he said my name, and I turned and looked at him. When someone knows your name, you don't have any option.

'Don't you know me?' he asked. I shook my head. I didn't know anyone who looked like that. You don't forget something like that. 'It's me,' he said, his voice a pleading whisper. 'Eddie Barrow. Come on mate. You know me.'

And when he said his name I did know him, more or less. I mean, I knew Eddie Barrow. We had worked on a building site together, ten years back, during my only real flirtation with manual work.

Eddie Barrow was tall, and heavily muscled, with a movie star smile and lazy good looks. He was ex-police. Sometimes he'd tell me stories, true tales of fitting-up and doing-over, of punishment and crime. He had left the force after some trouble between him and one of the top brass. He said it was the Chief Superintendent's wife forced him to leave. Eddie was always getting into trouble with women. They really liked him, women.

When we were working together on the building site they'd hunt him down, give him sandwiches, little presents, whatever. He never seemed to *do* anything to make them like him; they just liked him. I

used to watch him to see how he did it, but it didn't seem to be anything he did. Eventually, I decided it was just the way he was: big, strong, not very bright, and terribly, terribly good-looking.

But that was ten years ago.

The man sitting at the Formica table wasn't good-looking. His eyes were dull, and rimmed with red, and they stared down at the table-top, without hope. His skin was grey. He was too thin, obscenely thin. I could see his scalp through his filthy hair. I said, 'What happened to you?'

'How d'you mean?'

'You look a bit rough,' I said, although he looked worse than rough; he looked dead. Eddie Barrow had been a big guy. Now he'd collapsed in on himself. All bones and flaking skin.

'Yeah,' he said. Or maybe 'Yeah?' I couldn't tell. Then, resigned, flatly, 'Happens to us all in the end.'

He gestured with his left hand, pointed at the seat opposite him. His right arm hung stiffly at his side, his right hand safe in the pocket of his coat.

Eddie's table was by the window, where anyone could see you walking past. Not somewhere I'd sit by choice, not if it was up to me. But it was too late now. I sat down facing him and I sipped my tea. I didn't say anything, which could have been a mistake.

Small talk might have kept his demons at a distance. But I cradled my mug and said nothing. So I suppose he must have thought that I wanted to know more, that I cared. I didn't care. I had enough problems of my own. I didn't want to know about his struggle with whatever it was that had brought him to this state – drink, or drugs, or disease – but he started to talk, in a grey voice, and I listened.

'I came here a few years back, when they were building the bypass. Stuck around after, the way you do. Got a room in an old place around the back of Prince Regent's Street. Room in the attic. It was a family house, really. They only rented out the top floor, so there were just the two boarders, me and Miss Corvier. We were both up in the attic, but in separate rooms, next-door to each other. I'd hear her moving about. And there was a cat. It was the family cat, but it came upstairs to say hello, every now and again, which was more than the family ever did.

'I always had my meals with the family, but Miss Corvier, she didn't ever come down for meals, so it was a week before I met her. She was coming out of the upstairs lavvy. She looked so old. Wrinkled face, like an old, old monkey. But long hair, down to her waist, like a young girl.

'It's funny, with old people, you don't think they feel things like we do. I mean, here's her, old enough to be my granny and . . .' He

stopped. Licked his lips with a grey tongue. ‘Anyway . . . I came up to the room one night and there’s a brown paper bag of mushrooms outside my door on the ground. It was a present, I knew that straight off. A present for me. Not normal mushrooms, though. So I knocked on her door.

‘I says, are these for me?

‘Picked them meself, Mister Barrow, she says.

‘They aren’t like toadstools or anything? I asked. Y’know, poisonous? Or funny mushrooms?

‘She just laughs. Cackles even. They’re for eating, she says. They’re fine. Shaggy inkcaps, they are. Eat them soon now. They go off quick. They’re best fried-up with a little butter and garlic.

‘I say, are you having some too?

‘She says, no. She says, I used to be a proper one for mushrooms, but not any more, not with my stomach. But they’re lovely. Nothing better than a young shaggy inkcap mushroom. It’s astonishing the things that people don’t eat. All the things around them that people could eat, if only they knew it.

‘I said thanks, and went back into my half of the attic. They’d done the conversion a few years before, nice job really. I put the mushrooms down by the sink. After a few days they dissolved into black stuff, like ink, and I had to put the whole mess into a plastic bag and throw it away.

‘I’m on my way downstairs with the plastic bag, and I run into her on the stairs, she says Hullo Mister B.

‘I say, Hello Miss Corvier.

‘Call me Effie, she says. How were the mushrooms?

‘Very nice, Thank you, I said. They were lovely.

‘She’d leave me other things after that, little presents, flowers in old milk-bottles, things like that, then nothing. I was a bit relieved when the presents suddenly stopped.

‘So I’m down at dinner with the family, the lad at the poly, he was home for the holidays. It was August. Really hot. And someone says they hadn’t seen her for about a week, and could I look in on her. I said I didn’t mind.

‘So I did. The door wasn’t locked. She was in bed. She had a thin sheet over her, but you could see she was naked under the sheet. Not that I was trying to see anything, it’d be like looking at your gran in the altogether. This old lady. But she looked so pleased to see me.

‘Do you need a doctor? I says.

‘She shakes her head. I’m not ill, she says. I’m hungry. That’s all.

‘Are you sure, I say, because I can call someone. It’s not a bother. They’ll come out for old people.

‘She says, Edward? I don’t want to be a burden on anyone, but I’m

so hungry.

'Right. I'll get you something to eat, I said. Something easy on your tummy, I says. That's when she surprises me. She looks embarrassed. Then she says, very quietly, *Meat*. It's got to be fresh meat, and raw. I won't let anyone else cook for me. Meat. Please, Edward.

'Not a problem I says, and I go downstairs. I thought for a moment about nicking it from the cat's bowl, but of course I didn't. It was like, I knew she wanted it, so I had to do it. I had no choice. I went down to Safeways, and I bought her a readipak of best-ground sirloin.

'The cat smelled it. Followed me up the stairs. I said, you get down, puss. It's not for you, I said. It's for Miss Corvier and she's not feeling well, and she's going to need it for her supper, and the thing mewed at me as if it hadn't been fed in a week, which I knew wasn't true because its bowl was still half-full. Stupid, that cat was.

'I knock on her door, she says, Come in. She's still in the bed, and I give her the pack of meat, and she says, Thank you, Edward, you've got a good heart. And she starts to tear off the plastic wrap, there in the bed. There's a puddle of brown blood under the plastic tray, and it drips onto her sheet, but she doesn't notice. Makes me shiver.

'I'm going out the door, and I can already hear her starting to eat with her fingers, cramming the raw mince into her mouth. And she hadn't got out of bed.

'But the next day she's up and about, and from there on she's in and out at all hours, in spite of her age, and I think there you are. They say red meat's bad for you, but it did her the world of good. And raw, well, it's just steak tartare, isn't it? You ever eaten raw meat?'

The question came as a surprise. I said, 'Me?'

Eddie looked at me with his dead eyes, and he said, 'Nobody else at this table.'

'Yes. A little. When I was a small boy – four, five years old – my grandmother would take me to the butcher's with her, and he'd give me slices of raw liver, and I'd just eat them, there in the shop, like that. And everyone would laugh.'

I hadn't thought of that in twenty years. But it was true.

I still like my liver rare, and sometimes, if I'm cooking and if nobody else is around, I'll cut a thin slice of raw liver before I season it, and I'll eat it, relishing the texture and the naked, iron taste.

'Not me,' he said. 'I liked my meat properly cooked. So the next thing that happened was Thompson went missing.'

'Thompson?'

'The cat. Somebody said there used to be two of them, and they called them Thompson and Thompson. I don't know why . Stupid, giving them both the same name. The first one was squashed by a lorry .' He pushed at a small mound of sugar on the Formica top with

a finger tip. His mound of sugar on the Formica top with a finger tip. His left hand, still. I was beginning to wonder whether he had a right arm. Maybe the sleeve was empty. Not that it was any of my business. Nobody gets through life without losing a few things on the way.

I was trying to think of some way of telling him I didn't have any money, just in case he was going to ask me for something when he got to the end of his story. I *didn't* have any money: just a train ticket and enough pennies for the bus ticket home.

'I was never much of a one for cats,' he said suddenly. 'Not really. I liked dogs. Big, faithful things. You knew where you were with a dog. Not cats. Go off for days on end, you don't see them. When I was a lad, we had a cat, it was called Ginger. There was a family down the street, they had a cat they called Marmalade. Turned out it was the same cat, getting fed by all of us. Well, I mean. Sneaky little buggers. You can't trust them.

'That was why I didn't think anything when Thompson went away. The family was worried. Not me. I knew it'd come back. They always do.

'Anyway, a few nights later, I heard it. I was trying to sleep, and I couldn't. It was the middle of the night, and I heard this mewing. Going on, and on, and on. It wasn't loud, but when you can't sleep these things just get on your nerves. I thought maybe it was stuck up in the rafters, or out on the roof outside. Wherever it was, there wasn't any point in trying to sleep through it. I knew that. So I got up, and I got dressed, even put my boots on in case I was going to be climbing out onto the roof, and I went looking for the cat.

'I went out in the corridor. It was coming from Miss Corvier's room on the other side of the attic. I knocked on her door, but no one answered. Tried the door. It wasn't locked. So I went in. I thought maybe that the cat was stuck somewhere. Or hurt. I don't know. I just wanted to help, really.

'Miss Corvier wasn't there. I mean, you know sometimes if there's anyone in a room, and that room was empty. Except there's something on the floor in the corner going *Mrie, Mrie* . . . And I turned on the light to see what it was.'

He stopped then for almost a minute, the fingers of his left hand picking at the black goo that had crusted around the neck of the ketchup bottle. It was shaped like a large tomato.

Then he said, 'What I didn't understand was how it could still be alive. I mean, it was. And from the chest up, it was alive, and breathing, and fur and everything. But its back legs, its rib cage. Like a chicken carcase. Just bones. And what are they called, sinews? And, it lifted its head, and it looked at me.

'It may have been a cat, but I knew what it wanted. It was in its

eyes. I mean.' He stopped. 'Well, I just knew. I'd never seen eyes like that. You would have known what it wanted, all it wanted, if you'd seen those eyes. I did what it wanted. You'd have to be a monster, not to.'

'What did you do?'

'I used my boots.' Pause. 'There wasn't much blood. Not really. I just stamped, and stamped on its head, until there wasn't really anything much left that looked like anything. If you'd seen it looking at you like that, you would have done what I did.'

I didn't say anything.

'And then I heard someone coming up the stairs to the attic, and I thought I ought to do something, I mean, it didn't look good, I don't know what it must have looked like really, but I just stood there, feeling stupid, with a stinking mess on my boots, and when the door opens, it's Miss Corvier.

'And she sees it all. She looks at me. And she says, You killed him. I can hear something funny in her voice, and for a moment I don't know what it is, and then she comes closer, and I realise that she's crying.

'That's something about old people, when they cry like children, you don't know where to look, do you? And she says, He was all I had to keep me going, and you killed him. After all I've done, she says, making it so the meat stays fresh, so the life stays on. After all I've done.

'I'm an old woman, she says. I need my meat.

'I didn't know what to say.

'She's wiping her eyes with her hand. I don't want to be a burden on anybody, she says. She's crying now. And she's looking at me. She says, I never wanted to be a burden. She says, that was my meat. Now, she says, who's going to feed me now?'

He stopped, rested his grey face in his left hand, as if he was tired. Tired of talking to me, tired of the story, tired of life. Then he shook his head, and looked at me, and said, 'If you'd seen that cat, you would have done what I did. Anyone would have done.'

He raised his head then, for the first time in his story, looked me in the eyes. I thought I saw an appeal for help in his eyes, something he was too proud to say aloud.

Here it comes, I thought. This is where he asks me for money.

Somebody outside tapped on the window of the café. It wasn't a loud tapping, but Eddie jumped. He said, 'I have to go now. That means I have to go.'

I just nodded. He got up from the table. He was still a tall man, which almost surprised me: he'd collapsed in on himself in so many other ways. He pushed the table away as he got up, and as he got up

he took his right hand out of his coat-pocket. For balance, I suppose. I don't know.

Maybe he wanted me to see it. But if he wanted me to see it, why did he keep it in his pocket the whole time? No, I don't think he wanted me to see it. I think it was an accident.

He wasn't wearing a shirt or a jumper under his coat, so I could see his arm, and his wrist. Nothing wrong with either of them. He had a normal wrist. It was only when you looked below the wrist that you saw most of the flesh had been picked from the bones, chewed like chicken wings, leaving only dried morsels of meat, scraps and crumbs, and little else. He only had three fingers left, and most of a thumb. I suppose the other finger-bones must have just fallen right off, with no skin or flesh to hold them on.

That was what I saw. Only for a moment, then he put his hand back in his pocket, and pushed out of the door, into the chilly night.

I watched him then, through the dirty plate-glass of the café window.

It was funny. From everything he'd said, I'd imagined Miss Corvier to be an old woman. But the woman waiting for him outside on the pavement couldn't have been much over thirty. She had long, long hair, though. The kind of hair you can sit on, as they say, although that always sounds faintly like a line from a dirty joke. She looked a bit like a hippy, I suppose. Sort of pretty, in a hungry kind of way.

She took his arm, and looked up into his eyes, and they walked away out of the café's light for all the world like a couple of teenagers who were just beginning to realise that they were in love.

I went back up to the counter and bought another cup of tea, and a couple of packets of crisps to see me through until the morning, and I sat and thought about the expression on his face when he'd looked at me that last time.

On the milk-train back to the big city I sat opposite a woman carrying a baby. It was floating in formaldehyde, in a heavy glass container. She needed to sell it, rather urgently, and although I was extremely tired we talked about her reasons for selling it, and about other things, for the rest of the journey.

Closing Time

There are still clubs in London. Old ones, and mock-old, with elderly sofas and crackling fireplaces, newspapers, and traditions of speech or of silence, and new clubs, the Groucho and its many knock-offs, where actors and journalists go to be seen, to drink, to enjoy their glowering solitude, or even to talk. I have friends in both kinds of club, but am not myself a member of any club in London, not any more.

Years ago, half a lifetime, when I was a young journalist, I joined a club. It existed solely to take advantage of the licensing laws of the day, which forced all pubs to stop serving drinks at eleven p.m., closing time. This club, the Diogenes, was a one-room affair located above a record shop in a narrow alley just off the Tottenham Court Road. It was owned by a cheerful, chubby, alcohol-fuelled woman called Nora, who would tell anyone who asked and even if they didn't that she'd called the club the Diogenes, darling, because she was still looking for an honest man. Up a narrow flight of steps, and, at Nora's whim, the door to the club would be open, or not. It kept irregular hours.

It was a place to go once the pubs closed, that was all it ever was, and despite Nora's doomed attempts to serve food or even to send out a cheery monthly newsletter to all her club's members reminding them that the club now served food, that was all it would ever be. I was saddened several years ago when I heard that Nora had died; and I was struck, to my surprise, with a real sense of desolation last month when, on a visit to England, walking down that alley, I tried to figure out where the Diogenes Club had been, and looked first in the wrong place, then saw the faded green cloth awnings shading the windows of a tapas restaurant above a mobile-phone shop, and, painted on them, a stylised man in a barrel. It seemed almost indecent, and it set me remembering.

There were no fireplaces in the Diogenes Club, and no armchairs either, but still, stories were told.

Most of the people drinking there were men, although women passed through from time to time, and Nora had recently acquired a glamorous permanent fixture in the shape of a deputy, a blonde Polish *émigrée* who called everybody 'darlink' and who helped herself to drinks whenever she got behind the bar. When she was drunk, she would tell us that she was by rights a countess, back in Poland, and swear us all to secrecy.

There were actors and writers, of course. Film editors, broadcasters,

police inspectors and drunks. People who did not keep fixed hours. People who stayed out too late, or who did not want to go home. Some nights there might be a dozen people there, or more. Other nights I'd wander in and I'd be the only person around – on those occasions I'd buy myself a single drink, drink it down, and then leave.

That night, it was raining, and there were four of us in the club after midnight.

Nora and her deputy were sitting up at the bar, working on their sitcom. It was about a chubby-but-cheerful woman who owned a drinking club, and her scatty deputy, an aristocratic foreign blonde who made amusing English mistakes. It would be like *Cheers*, Nora used to tell people. She named the comical Jewish landlord after me. Sometimes they would ask me to read a script.

There was an actor named Paul (commonly known as Paul-the-actor, to stop people confusing him with Paul-the-police-inspector or Paul-the-struck-off-plastic-surgeon, who were also regulars), a computer-gaming magazine editor named Martyn, and me. We knew each other vaguely, and the three of us sat at a table by the window and watched the rain come down, misting and blurring the lights of the alley.

There was another man there, older by far than any of the three of us. He was cadaverous, and grey-haired and painfully thin, and he sat alone in the corner and nursed a single whisky. The elbows of his tweed jacket were patched with brown leather, I remember that quite vividly. He did not talk to us, or read, or do anything. He just sat, looking out at the rain and the alley beneath, and, sometimes, he sipped his whisky without any visible pleasure.

It was almost midnight, and Paul and Martyn and I had started telling ghost stories. I had just finished telling them a sworn-true ghostly account from my schooldays: the tale of the Green Hand. It had been an article of faith at my prep school that there was a disembodied, luminous hand that was seen, from time to time, by unfortunate schoolboys. If you saw the Green Hand you would die soon after. Fortunately, none of us was ever unlucky enough to encounter it, but there were sad tales of boys from before our time, boys who saw the Green Hand and whose thirteen-year-old hair had turned white overnight. According to school legend they were taken to the sanatorium, where they would expire after a week or so without ever being able to utter another word.

'Hang on,' said Paul-the-actor. 'If they never uttered another word, how did anyone know they'd seen the Green Hand? I mean, they could have seen anything.'

As a boy, being told the stories, I had not thought to ask this, and now it was pointed out to me it did seem somewhat problematic.

‘Perhaps they wrote something down,’ I suggested, a bit lamely.

We batted it about for a while, and agreed that the Green Hand was a most unsatisfactory sort of ghost. Then Paul told us a true story about a friend of his who had picked up a hitchhiker, and dropped her off at a place she said was her house, and when he went back the next morning, it turned out to be a cemetery. I mentioned that exactly the same thing had happened to a friend of mine as well. Martyn said that it had not only happened to a friend of his but, because the hitchhiking girl looked so cold, the friend had lent her his coat, and the next morning, in the cemetery, he found his coat all neatly folded on her grave.

Martyn went and got another round of drinks, and we wondered why all these ghost-women were zooming around the country all night and hitchhiking home, and Martyn said that probably living hitchhikers these days were the exception, not the rule.

And then one of us said, ‘I’ll tell you a true story, if you like. It’s a story I’ve never told a living soul. It’s true – it happened to me, not to a friend of mine – but I don’t know if it’s a ghost story. It probably isn’t.’

This was over twenty years ago. I have forgotten so many things, but I have not forgotten that night, or how it ended.

This is the story that was told that night, in the Diogenes Club.

I was nine years old, or thereabouts, in the late nineteen sixties, and I was attending a small private school not far from my home. I was only at that school less than a year – long enough to take a dislike to the school’s owner, who had bought the school in order to close it, and to sell the prime land on which it stood to property developers, which, shortly after I left, she did.

For a long time – a year or more – after the school closed the building stood empty before it was finally demolished and replaced by offices. Being a boy, I was also a burglar of sorts, and one day before it was knocked down, curious, I went back there. I wriggled through a half-open window and walked through empty classrooms that still smelled of chalk dust. I took only one thing from my visit, a painting I had done in Art of a little house with a red door-knocker like a devil or an imp. It had my name on it, and it was up on a wall. I took it home.

When the school was still open I walked home each day, through the town, then down a dark road cut through sandstone hills and all grown over with trees, and past an abandoned gatehouse. Then there would be light, and the road would go past fields, and finally I would be home.

Back then there were so many old houses and estates, Victorian

relics that stood in an empty half-life awaiting the bulldozers that would transform them and their ramshackle grounds into blandly identical landscapes of desirable modern residences, every house neatly arranged side by side around roads that went nowhere.

The other children I encountered on my way home were, in my memory, always boys. We did not know each other, but, like guerrillas in occupied territory, we would exchange information. We were scared of adults, not each other. We did not have to know each other to run in twos or threes or in packs.

The day that I'm thinking of, I was walking home from school, and I met three boys in the road where it was at its darkest. They were looking for something in the ditches and the hedges and the weed-choked place in front of the abandoned gatehouse. They were older than me.

'What are you looking for?'

The tallest of them, a beanpole of a boy, with dark hair and a sharp face, said, 'Look!' He held up several ripped-in-half pages from what must have been a very, very old pornographic magazine. The girls were all in black and white, and their hairstyles looked like the ones my great-aunts had in old photographs. Fragments of it had blown all over the road and into the abandoned gatehouse front garden.

I joined in the paper-chase. Together, the three of us retrieved almost a whole copy of *The Gentleman's Relish* from that dark place. Then we climbed over a wall, into a deserted apple-orchard, and looked at it. Naked women from a long time ago. There is a smell, of fresh apples, and of rotten apples mouldering down into cider, that even today brings back the idea of the forbidden to me.

The smaller boys, who were still bigger than I was, were called Simon and Douglas, and the tall one, who might have been as old as fifteen, was called Jamie. I wondered if they were brothers. I did not ask.

When we had all looked at the magazine, they said, 'We're going to hide this in our special place. Do you want to come along? You mustn't tell, if you do. You mustn't tell anyone.'

They made me spit on my palm, and they spat on theirs, and we pressed our hands together.

Their special place was an abandoned metal water-tower, in a field by the entrance to the lane near to where I lived. We climbed a high ladder. The tower was painted a dull green on the outside, and inside it was orange with rust, which covered the floor and the walls. There was a wallet on the floor with no money in it, only some cigarette cards. Jamie showed them to me: each card held a painting of a cricketer from a long time ago. They put the pages of the magazine down on the floor of the water-tower, and the wallet on top of it.

Then Douglas said, ‘I say we go back to the Swallows next.’

My house was not far from the Swallows, a sprawling manor-house set back from the road. It had been owned, my father had told me once, by the Earl of Tenterden, but when he had died his son, the new earl, had simply closed the place up. I had wandered to the edges of the grounds, but had not gone further in. It did not feel abandoned. The gardens were too well cared-for, and where there were gardens there were gardeners. Somewhere there had to be an adult.

I told them this.

Jamie said, ‘Bet there’s not. Probably just someone who comes in and cuts the grass once a month or something. You’re not scared, are you? We’ve been there hundreds of times. Thousands.’

Of course, I was scared, and of course I said that I was not. We went up the main drive, until we reached the main gates. They were closed, and we squeezed beneath the bars to get in.

Rhododendron bushes lined the drive. Before we got to the house there was what I took to be a groundskeeper’s cottage, and beside it on the grass were some rusting metal cages, big enough to hold a hunting dog, or a boy. We walked past them, up to a horseshoe-shaped drive and right up to the front door of the Swallows. We peered inside, looking in the windows, but seeing nothing. It was too dark inside.

We slipped around the house, into a rhododendron thicket and out again, into some kind of fairyland. It was a magical grotto, all rocks and delicate ferns and odd, exotic plants I’d never seen before: plants with purple leaves, and leaves like fronds, and small half-hidden flowers like jewels. A tiny stream wound through it, a rill of water running from rock to rock.

Douglas said, ‘I’m going to wee-wee in it.’ It was very matter-of-fact. He walked over to it, pulled down his shorts and urinated in the stream, splashing on the rocks. The other boys did it too, both of them pulling out their penises and standing beside him to piss into the stream.

I was shocked. I remember that. I suppose I was shocked by the joy they took in this, or just by the way they were doing something like that in such a special place, spoiling the clear water and the magic of the place; making it into a toilet. It seemed wrong.

When they were done, they did not put their penises away. They shook them. They pointed them at me. Jamie had hair growing at the base of his.

‘We’re cavaliers,’ said Jamie. ‘Do you know what that means?’

I knew about the English Civil War, Cavaliers (wrong but romantic) versus Roundheads (right but repulsive), but I didn’t think that was what he was talking about. I shook my head.

‘It means our willies aren’t circumcised,’ he explained. ‘Are you a cavalier or a roundhead?’

I knew what they meant now. I muttered, ‘I’m a roundhead.’

‘Show us. Go on. Get it out.’

‘No. It’s none of your business.’

For a moment, I thought things were going to get nasty, but then Jamie laughed, and put his penis away, and the others did the same. They told dirty jokes to each other then, jokes I really didn’t understand for all that I was a bright child, but I heard and remembered them, and several weeks later was almost expelled from school for telling one of them to a boy who went home and told it to his parents.

The joke had the word ‘fuck’ in it. That was the first time I ever heard the word, in a dirty joke in a fairy grotto.

The principal called my parents into the school, after I’d got into trouble, and said that I’d said something so bad they could not repeat it, not even to tell my parents what I’d done.

My mother asked me, when they got home that night.

‘Fuck,’ I said.

‘You must never, ever say that word,’ said my mother. She said this very firmly, and quietly, and for my own good. ‘That is the worst word anyone can say.’ I promised her that I wouldn’t.

But after, amazed at the power a single word could have, I would whisper it to myself, when I was alone.

In the grotto, that autumn afternoon after school, the three big boys told jokes and they laughed and they laughed, and I laughed too, although I did not understand any of what they were laughing about.

We moved on from the grotto. Into the formal gardens, and over a small bridge that spanned a pond; we crossed it nervously, because it was out in the open, but we could see huge goldfish in the blackness of the pond below , which made it worthwhile. Then Jamie led Douglas and Simon and me down a gravel path into some woodland.

Unlike the gardens, the woods were abandoned and unkempt. They felt like there was no one around. The path was grown-over. It led between trees, and then, after a while, into a clearing.

In the clearing was a little house.

It was a playhouse, built perhaps forty years earlier for a child, or for children. The windows were Tudor-style, leaded and criss-crossed into diamonds. The roof was mock-Tudor. A stone path led straight from where we were to the front door.

Together, we walked up the path to the door.

Hanging from the door was a metal knocker. It was painted crimson, and had been cast in the shape of some kind of imp, some kind of grinning pixie or demon, cross-legged, hanging by its hands

from a hinge. Let me see . . . how can I describe this best? It wasn't a *good* thing. The expression on its face, for starters. I found myself wondering what kind of a person would hang something like that on a playhouse door.

It frightened me, there in that clearing, with the dusk gathering under the trees. I walked away from the house, back to a safe distance, and the others followed me.

'I think I have to go home now,' I said.

It was the wrong thing to say. The three of them turned and laughed and jeered at me, called me pathetic, called me a baby. *They* weren't scared of the house, they said.

'I dare you!' said Jamie. 'I dare you to knock on the door.'

I shook my head.

'If you don't knock on the door,' said Douglas, 'you're too much of a baby ever to play with us again.'

I had no desire ever to play with them again. They seemed like occupants of a land I was not yet ready to enter. But still, I did not want them to think me a baby.

'Go on. *We*'re not scared,' said Simon.

I try to remember the tone of voice he used. Was he frightened, too, and covering it with bravado? Or was he amused? It's been so long. I wish I knew.

I walked slowly back up the flagstone path to the house. I reached up, grabbed the grinning imp in my right hand and banged it hard against the door.

Or, rather, I tried to bang it hard, just to show the other three that I was not afraid at all. That I was not afraid of anything. But something happened, something I had not expected, and the knocker hit the door with a muffled sort of a thump.

'Now you have to go inside!' shouted Jamie. He was excited. I could hear it. I found myself wondering if they had known about this place already, before we came. If I was the first person they had brought there.

But I did not move.

'*You* go in,' I said. 'I knocked on the door. I did it like you said. Now *you* have to go inside. I dare you. I dare *all* of you.'

I wasn't going in. I was perfectly certain of that. Not then. Not ever. I'd felt something move, I'd felt the knocker *twist* under my hand as I'd banged that grinning imp down on the door. I was not so old that I would deny my own senses.

They said nothing. They did not move.

Then, slowly, the door fell open. Perhaps they thought that I, standing by the door, had pushed it open. Perhaps they thought that I'd jarred it when I knocked. But I hadn't. I was certain of it. It opened

because it was ready.

I should have run, then. My heart was pounding in my chest. But the devil was in me, and instead of running I looked at the three big boys at the bottom of the path, and I simply said, 'Or are you scared?'

They walked up the path towards the little house.

'It's getting dark,' said Douglas.

Then the three boys walked past me, and one by one, reluctantly perhaps, they entered the playhouse. A white face turned to look at me as they went into that room, to ask why I wasn't following them in, I'll bet. But as Simon, who was the last of them, walked in, the door banged shut behind them, and I swear to God I did not touch it.

The imp grinned down at me from the wooden door, a vivid splash of crimson in the grey gloaming.

I walked around to the side of the playhouse and peered through all the windows, one by one, into the dark and empty room. Nothing moved in there. I wondered if the other three were inside hiding from me, pressed against the wall, trying their damnedest to stifle their giggles. I wondered if it was a big-boy game.

I didn't know. I couldn't tell.

I stood there in the courtyard of the playhouse, while the sky got darker, just waiting. The moon rose after a while, a big autumn moon the colour of honey.

And then, after a while, the door opened, and nothing came out.

Now I was alone in the glade, as alone as if there had never been anyone else there at all. An owl hooted, and I realised that I was free to go. I turned and walked away, following a different path out of the glade, always keeping my distance from the main house. I climbed a fence in the moonlight, ripping the seat of my school shorts, and I walked – not ran, I didn't need to run – across a field of barley stubble, and over a stile, and into a flinty lane that would take me, if I followed it far enough, all the way to my house.

And, soon enough, I was home.

My parents had not been worried, although they were irritated by the orange rust-dust on my clothes, by the rip in my shorts. 'Where were you, anyway?' my mother asked.

'I went for a walk,' I said. 'I lost track of time.'

And that was where we left it.

It was almost two in the morning. The Polish countess had already gone. Now Nora began, noisily, to collect up the glasses and ashtrays, and to wipe down the bar. '*This* place is haunted,' she said, cheerfully. 'Not that it's ever bothered me. I like a bit of company, darlings. If I didn't, I wouldn't have opened the club. Now, don't you have homes to go to?'

We said our goodnights to Nora and she made each of us kiss her on her cheek, and she closed the door of the Diogenes Club behind us. We walked down the narrow steps past the record shop, down into the alley and back into civilisation.

The underground had stopped running hours ago, but there were always night buses, and cabs still out there for those who could afford them. (I couldn't. Not in those days.)

The Diogenes Club itself closed several years later, finished off by Nora's cancer and, I suppose, by the easy availability of late-night alcohol once the English licensing laws were changed. But I rarely went back after that night.

'Was there ever,' asked Paul-the-actor, as we hit the street, 'any news of those three boys? Did you see them again? Or were they reported as missing?'

'Neither,' said the storyteller. 'I mean, I never saw them again. And there was no local manhunt for three missing boys. Or if there was, I never heard about it.'

'Is the playhouse still there?' asked Martyn.

'I don't know,' admitted the storyteller.

'Well,' said Martyn, as we reached the Tottenham Court Road, and headed for the night bus stop, 'I for one do not believe a word of it.'

There were four of us, not three, out on the street long after closing time. I should have mentioned that before. There was still one of us who had not spoken, the elderly man with the leather elbow-patches, who had left the club with the three of us. And now he spoke for the first time.

'I believe it,' he said mildly. His voice was frail, almost apologetic. 'I cannot explain it, but I believe it. Jamie died, you know, not long after Father did. It was Douglas who wouldn't go back, who sold the old place. He wanted them to tear it all down. But they kept the house itself, the Swallows. They weren't going to knock *that* down. I imagine that everything else must be gone by now.'

It was a cold night, and the rain still spat occasional drizzle. I shivered, but only because I was cold.

'Those cages you mentioned,' he said. 'By the driveway. I haven't thought of them in fifty years. When we were bad he'd lock us up in them. We must have been bad a great deal, eh? Very naughty, naughty boys.'

He was looking up and down the Tottenham Court Road, as if he were looking for something. Then he said, 'Douglas killed himself, of course. Ten years ago. When I was still in the bin. So my memory's not as good. Not as good as it was. But that was Jamie, all right, to the life. He'd never let us forget that he was the oldest. And you know, we weren't ever allowed in the playhouse. Father didn't build it for us.'

His voice quavered, and for a moment I could imagine this pale old man as a boy again. ‘Father had his own games.’

And then he waved his arm and called, ‘Taxi!’ and a taxi pulled over to the kerb. ‘Brown’s Hotel,’ said the man, and he got in. He did not say goodnight to any of us. He pulled shut the door of the cab.

And in the closing of the cab door I could hear too many other doors closing. Doors in the past, which are gone now, and cannot be reopened.

Looking for the Girl

I was nineteen in 1965, in my drainpipe trousers with my hair quietly creeping down toward my collar. Every time you turned on the radio the Beatles were singing *Help*! and I wanted to be John Lennon with all the girls screaming after me, always ready with a cynical quip. That was the year I bought my first copy of *Penthouse* from a small tobacconist's in the King's Road. I paid my few furtive shillings and went home with it stuffed up my jumper, occasionally glancing down to see if it had burnt a hole in the fabric.

The copy has long since been thrown away, but I'll always remember it: sedate letters about censorship; a short story by H. E. Bates and an interview with an American novelist I had never heard of; a fashion spread of mohair suits and paisley ties, all to be bought on Carnaby Street. And best of all, there were girls, of course; and best of all the girls, there was Charlotte.

Charlotte was nineteen, too.

All the girls in that long-gone magazine seemed identical with their perfect plastic flesh; not a hair out of place (you could almost smell the lacquer); smiling wholesomely at the camera while their eyes squinted at you through forest-thick eyelashes: white lipstick; white teeth, white breasts, bikini-bleached. I never gave a thought to the strange positions they had coyly arranged themselves into to avoid showing the slightest curl or shadow of pubic hair – I wouldn't have known what I was looking at anyway. I had eyes only for their pale bottoms and breasts, their chaste but inviting come-on glances.

Then I turned the page, and I saw Charlotte. She was different from the others. Charlotte *was* sex; she wore sexuality like a translucent veil, like a heady perfume.

There were words beside the pictures, and I read them in a daze. 'The entrancing Charlotte Reave is nineteen . . . a resurgent individualist and beat poet, contributor to *FAB* magazine . . .' Phrases stuck to my mind as I pored over the flat pictures: she posed and pouted in a Chelsea flat – the photographer's, I guessed – and I knew that I needed her.

She was my age. It was fate.

Charlotte.

Charlotte was nineteen.

I bought *Penthouse* regularly after that, hoping she'd appear again. But she didn't. Not then.

Six months later my mum found a shoebox under my bed and

looked inside it. First she threw a scene, then she threw out all the magazines, finally she threw me out. The next day I got a job and a bedsit in Earl's Court, without, all things considered, too much trouble.

My job, my first, was at an electrical shop off the Edgware Road. All I could do was change a plug, but in those days people could afford to get an electrician in to do just that. My boss told me I could learn on the job.

I lasted three weeks. My first job was a proper thrill – changing the plug on the bedside light of an English film star, who had achieved fame through his portrayal of laconic Cockney Casanovas. When I got there he was in bed with two honest-to-goodness dolly birds. I changed the plug and left – it was all very proper. I didn't even catch a glimpse of nipple, let alone get invited to join them.

Three weeks later I got fired and lost my virginity on the same day. It was a posh place in Hampstead, empty apart from the maid, a little dark-haired woman a few years older than me. I got down on my knees to change the plug, and she climbed on a chair next to me to dust off the top of a door. I looked up: under her skirt she was wearing stockings, and suspenders, and, so help me, nothing else. I discovered what happened in the bits the pictures didn't show you.

So I lost my cherry under a dining room table in Hampstead. You don't see maidservants anymore. They have gone the way of the bubble car and the dinosaur.

It was afterward that I lost my job. Not even my boss, convinced as he was of my utter incompetence, believed I could have taken three hours to change a plug – and I wasn't about to tell him that I'd spent two of the hours I'd been gone hiding underneath the dining room table when the master and mistress of the house came home unexpectedly, was I?

I got a succession of short-lived jobs after that: first as a printer, then as a typesetter, before I wound up in a little ad agency above a sandwich shop in Old Compton Street.

I carried on buying *Penthouse*. Everybody looked like an extra in *The Avengers*, but they looked like that in real life. Articles on Woody Allen and Sappho's island, Batman and Vietnam, strippers in action wielding whips, fashion and fiction and sex.

The suits gained velvet collars, and the girls messed up their hair. Fetish was fashion. London was swinging, the magazine covers were psychedelic, and if there wasn't acid in the drinking water, we acted as if there ought to have been.

I saw Charlotte again in 1969, long after I'd given up on her. I thought that I had forgotten what she looked like. Then one day the head of the agency dropped a *Penthouse* on my desk – there was a

cigarette ad we'd placed in it that he was particularly pleased with. I was twenty-three, a rising star, running the art department as if I knew what I was doing, and sometimes I did.

I don't remember much about the issue itself; all I remember is Charlotte. Hair wild and tawny, eyes provocative, smiling like she knew all the secrets of life, and she was keeping them close to her naked chest. Her name wasn't Charlotte then, it was Melanie, or something like that. The text said that she was nineteen.

I was living with a dancer called Rachel at the time, in a flat in Camden Town. She was the best-looking, most delightful woman I've ever known, was Rachel. And I went home early with those pictures of Charlotte in my briefcase, and locked myself in the bathroom, and I wanked myself into a daze.

We broke up shortly after that, me and Rachel.

The ad agency boomed – everything in the sixties boomed – and in 1971 I was given the task of finding 'The Face' for a clothing label. They wanted a girl who would epitomize everything sexual; who would wear their clothes as if she were about to reach up and rip them off – if some man didn't get there first. And I knew the perfect girl: Charlotte.

I phoned *Penthouse*, who didn't know what I was talking about, but, reluctantly, put me in touch with both of the photographers who had shot her in the past. The man at *Penthouse* didn't seem convinced when I told them it was the same girl each time.

I got hold of the photographers, trying to find her agency.

They said she didn't exist.

At least not in any way you could pin down, she didn't. Sure, both of them knew the girl I meant. But as one of them told me, 'Like, *weird*,' she'd come to them. They'd paid her a modelling fee and sold the pictures. No, they didn't have any addresses for her.

I was twenty-six and a fool. I saw immediately what must be happening: I was being given the runaround. Some other ad agency had obviously signed her, was planning a big campaign around her, had paid the photographers to keep quiet. I cursed and I shouted at them over the phone. I made outrageous financial offers.

They told me to fuck off.

And the next month she was in *Penthouse*. No longer a psychedelic tease mag, it had become classier – the girls had grown pubic hair, had man-eating glints in their eyes. Men and women romped in soft focus through cornfields, pink against the gold.

Her name, said the text, was Belinda. She was an antique dealer. It was Charlotte, all right, although her hair was dark and piled in rich ringlets over her head. The text also gave her age: nineteen.

I phoned my contact at *Penthouse* and got the name of the

photographer, John Felbridge. I rang him. Like the others, he claimed to know nothing about her, but by now I'd learned a lesson. Instead of shouting at him down the telephone line, I gave him a job, on a fairly sizeable account, shooting a small boy eating ice cream. Felbridge was long-haired, in his late thirties, with a ratty fur coat and plimsolls that were flapping open, but a good photographer. After the shoot, I took him out for a drink, and we talked about the lousy weather, and photography, and decimal currency, and his previous work, and Charlotte.

'So you were saying you'd seen the pictures in *Penthouse*?' Felbridge said.

I nodded. We were both slightly drunk.

'I'll tell you about that girl. You know something? She's why I want to give up glamour work and go legit. Said her name was Belinda.'

'How did you meet her?'

'I'm getting to that, aren't I? I thought she was from an agency, didn't I? She knocks on the door, I think strewth! and invite her in. She said she wasn't from an agency, she says she's selling . . .' He wrinkled his brow, confused. 'Isn't that odd? I've forgotten what she was selling. Maybe she wasn't selling anything. I don't know. I'll forget me own name next.

'I knew she was something special. Asked her if she'd pose, told her it was kosher, I wasn't just trying to get into her pants, and she agrees. Click, flash! Five rolls, just like that. As soon as we're finished, she's got her clothes back on, heads out the door pretty-as-you-please. "What about your money?" I says to her. "Send it to me," she says, and she's down the steps and onto the road.'

'So you *have* got her address?' I asked, trying to keep the interest out of my voice.

'No. Bugger all. I wound up setting her fee aside in case she comes back.'

I remember, in with the disappointment, wondering whether his Cockney accent was real or merely fashionable.

'But what I was leading up to is this. When the pictures came back, I knew I'd . . . well, as far as tits and fanny went, no – as far as the whole photographing women thing went – I'd done it all. She *was* women, see? I'd *done* it. No, no, let me get you one. My shout. Bloody Mary, wasn't it? I gotter say, I'm looking forward to our future work together ...'

There wasn't to be any future work.

The agency was taken over by an older, bigger firm, who wanted our accounts. They incorporated the initials of the firm into their own and kept on a few top copywriters, but they let the rest of us go.

I went back to my flat and waited for the offers of work to pour in,

which they didn't, but a friend of a girlfriend of a friend starting chatting to me late one night in a club (music by a guy I'd never heard of, name of David Bowie. He was dressed as a spaceman, the rest of his band were in silver cowboy outfits. I didn't even listen to the songs), and the next thing you know I was managing a rock band of my own, the Diamonds of Flame. Unless you were hanging around the London club scene in the early seventies you'll never have heard of them, although they were a very good band. Tight, lyrical. Five guys. Two of them are currently in world-league supergroups. One of them's a plumber in Walsall; he still sends me Christmas cards. The other two have been dead for fifteen years: anonymous ODs. They went within a week of each other, and it broke up the band.

It broke me up, too. I dropped out after that – I wanted to get as far away from the city and that lifestyle as I could. I bought a small farm in Wales. I was happy there, too, with the sheep and the goats and the cabbages. I'd probably be there today if it hadn't been for her and *Penthouse*.

I don't know where it came from; one morning I went outside to find the magazine lying in the yard, in the mud, face down. It was almost a year old. She wore no makeup and was posed in what looked like a very high-class flat. For the first time I could see her pubic hair, or I could have if the photo hadn't been artistically fuzzed and just a fraction out of focus. She looked as if she were coming out of the mist.

Her name, it said, was Lesley. She was nineteen.

And after that I just couldn't stay away anymore. I sold the farm for a pittance and came back to London in the last days of 1976.

I went on the dole, lived in a council flat in Victoria, got up at lunchtime, hit the pubs until they closed in the afternoons, read newspapers in the library until opening time, then pub-crawled until closing time. I lived off my dole money and drank from my savings account.

I was thirty and I felt much older. I started living with an anonymous blonde punkette from Canada I met in a drinking club in Greek Street. She was the barmaid, and one night, after closing, she told me she'd just lost her digs, so I offered her the sofa at my place. She was only sixteen, it turned out, and she never got to sleep on the sofa. She had small, pomegranate breasts, a skull tattooed on her back, and a junior Bride of Frankenstein hairdo. She said she'd done everything and believed in nothing. She would talk for hours about the way the world was moving toward a condition of anarchy, claimed that there was no hope and no future; but she fucked like she'd just invented fucking. And I figured that was good.

She'd come to bed wearing nothing but a spiky black leather dog collar and masses of messy black eye makeup. She spat sometimes,

just gobbed on the pavement, when we were walking, which I hated, and she made me take her to the punk clubs, to watch her gob and swear and pogo. Then I really felt old. I liked some of the music, though: *Peaches*, stuff like that. And I saw the Sex Pistols play live. They were rotten.

Then the punkette walked out on me, claiming that I was a boring old fart, and she took up with an extremely plump Arab princeling.

'I thought you didn't believe in anything,' I called after her as she climbed into the Roller he sent to collect her.

'I believe in hundred quid blowjobs and mink sheets,' she called back, one hand playing with a strand of her Bride of Frankenstein hairdo. 'And a gold vibrator. I believe in that.'

So she went away to an oil fortune and a new wardrobe, and I checked my savings and found I was dead broke – practically penniless. I was still sporadically buying *Penthouse*. My sixties soul was both deeply shocked and profoundly thrilled by the amount of flesh now on view. Nothing was left to the imagination, which, at the same time, attracted and repelled me.

Then, near the end of 1977, *she* was there again.

Her hair was multicoloured, my Charlotte, and her mouth was as crimson as if she'd been eating raspberries. She lay on satin sheets with a jeweled mask on her face and a hand between her legs, ecstatic, orgasmic, all I ever wanted: Charlotte.

She was appearing under the name of Titania and was draped with peacock feathers. She worked, I was informed by the insectile black words that crept around her photographs, in an estate agent's in the South. She liked sensitive, honest men. She was nineteen.

And goddamn it, she *looked* nineteen. And I was broke, on the dole with just over a million others, and going nowhere.

I sold my record collection, and my books, all but four copies of *Penthouse*, and most of the furniture, and I bought myself a fairly good camera. Then I phoned all the photographers I'd known when I was in advertising almost a decade before.

Most of them didn't remember me, or they said they didn't. And those that did, didn't want an eager young assistant who wasn't young anymore and had no experience. But I kept trying and eventually got hold of Harry Bleak, a silver-haired old boy with his own studios in Crouch End and a posse of expensive little boyfriends.

I told him what I wanted. He didn't even stop to think about it. 'Be here in two hours.'

'No catches?'

'Two hours. No more.'

I was there.

For the first year I cleaned the studio, painted backdrops, and went

out to the local shops and streets to beg, buy or borrow appropriate props. The next year he let me help with the lights, set up shots, waft smoke pellets and dry ice around, and make the tea. I'm exaggerating – I only made the tea once; I make terrible tea. But I learned a hell of a lot about photography.

And suddenly it was 1981, and the world was newly romantic, and I was thirty-five and feeling every minute of it. Bleak told me to look after the studio for a few weeks while he went off to Morocco for a month of well-earned debauchery.

She was in *Penthouse* that month. More coy and prim than before, waiting for me neatly between advertisements for stereos and Scotch. She was called Dawn, but she was still my Charlotte, with nipples like beads of blood on her tanned breasts, dark fuzzy thatch between forever legs, shot on location on a beach somewhere. She was only nineteen, said the text. Charlotte. Dawn.

Harry Bleak was killed travelling back from Morocco: a bus fell on him.

It's not funny, really – he was on a car ferry coming back from Calais, and he snuck down into the car hold to get his cigars, which he'd left in the glove compartment of the Merc.

The weather was rough, and a tourist bus (belonging, I read in the papers, and was told at length by a tearful boyfriend, to a shopping co-op in Wigan) hadn't been chained down properly. Harry was crushed against the side of his silver Mercedes.

He had always kept that car spotless.

When the will was read I discovered that the old bastard had left me his studio. I cried myself to sleep that night, got stinking drunk for a week, and then opened for business.

Things happened between then and now. I got married. It lasted three weeks, then we called it a day. I guess I'm not the marrying type. I got beaten up by a drunken Glaswegian on a train late one night, and the other passengers pretended it wasn't happening. I bought a couple of terrapins and a tank, put them in the flat over the studio, and called them Rodney and Kevin. I became a fairly good photographer. I did calendars, advertising, fashion and glamour work, little kids and big stars: the works.

And one spring day in 1985, I met Charlotte.

I was alone in the studio on a Thursday morning, unshaven and barefoot. It was a free day, and I was going to spend it cleaning the place and reading the papers. I had left the studio doors open, letting the fresh air in to replace the stink of cigarettes and spilled wine of the shoot the night before, when a woman's voice said, 'Bleak Photographic?'

'That's right,' I said, not turning around, 'but Bleak's dead. I run the

place now.'

'I want to model for you,' she said.

I turned around. She was about five foot six, with honey-coloured hair, olive green eyes, a smile like cold water in the desert.

'Charlotte?'

She tilted her head to one side. 'If you like. Do you want to take my picture?'

I nodded dumbly. Plugged in the umbrellas, stood her up against a bare brick wall, and shot off a couple of test Polaroids. No special makeup, no set, just a few lights, a Hasselblad, and the most beautiful girl in my world.

After a while, she began to take off her clothes. I did not ask her to. I don't remember saying *anything* to her. She undressed and I carried on taking photographs.

She knew it all. How to pose, to preen, to stare. Silently she flirted with the camera, and with me standing behind it, moving around her, clicking away. I don't remember stopping for anything, but I must have changed films, because I wound up with a dozen rolls at the end of the day.

I suppose you think that after the pictures were taken, I made love with her. Now, I'd be a liar if I said I've never screwed models in my time, and, for that matter, some of them have screwed me. But I didn't touch her. She was my dream; and if you touch a dream it vanishes, like a soap bubble.

And anyway, I simply couldn't touch her.

'How old are you?' I asked her just before she left, when she was pulling on her coat and picking up her bag.

'Nineteen,' she told me without looking around, and then she was out the door.

She didn't say good-bye.

I sent the photos to *Penthouse*. I couldn't think of anywhere else to send them. Two days later I got a call from the art editor. 'Loved the girl! Real face-of-the-eighties stuff. What are her vital statistics?'

'Her name is Charlotte,' I told him. 'She's nineteen.'

And now I'm thirty-nine, and one day I'll be fifty, and she'll still be nineteen. But someone else will be taking the photographs.

Rachel, my dancer, married an architect.

The blonde punkette from Canada runs a multinational fashion chain. I do some photographic work for her from time to time. Her hair's cut short, and there's a smudge of gray in it, and she's a lesbian these days. She told me she's still got the mink sheets, but she made up the bit about the gold vibrator.

My ex-wife married a nice bloke who owns two video rental shops, and they moved to Slough. They have twin boys.

I don't know what happened to the maid.

And Charlotte?

In Greece the philosophers are debating, Socrates is drinking hemlock, and she's posing for a sculpture of Erato, muse of light poetry and lovers, and she's nineteen.

In Crete she's oiling her breasts, and she's jumping bulls in the ring while King Minos applauds, and someone's painting her likeness on a wine jar, and she's nineteen.

In 2065 she's stretched out on the revolving floor of a holographic photographer, who records her as an erotic dream in Living Sensolove, imprisons the sight and sound and the very smell of her in a tiny diamond matrix. She's only nineteen.

And a caveman outlines Charlotte with a burnt stick on the wall of the temple cave, filling in the shape and the texture of her with earths and berry dyes. Nineteen.

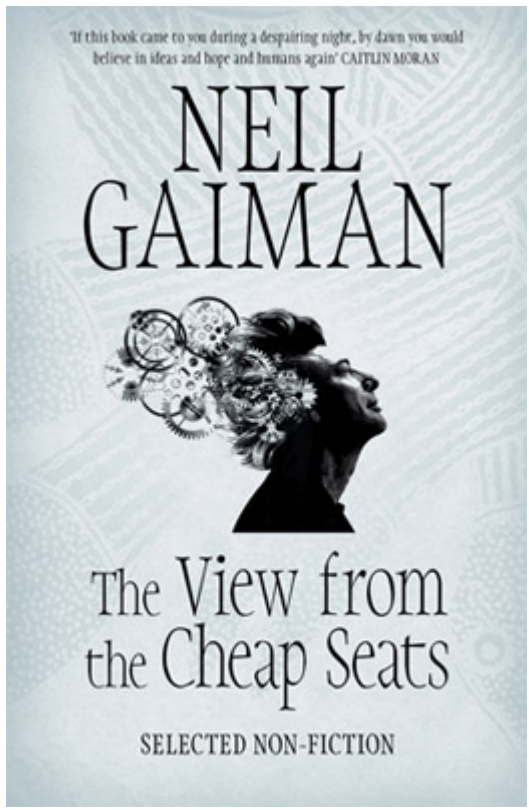
Charlotte is there, in all places, all times, sliding through our fantasies, a girl forever.

I want her so much it makes me hurt sometimes. That's when I take down the photographs of her and just look at them for a while, wondering why I didn't try to touch her, why I wouldn't really even speak to her when she was there, and never coming up with an answer that I could understand.

That's why I've written this all down, I suppose.

This morning I noticed yet another gray hair at my temple. Charlotte is nineteen. Somewhere.

The View from the Cheap Seats

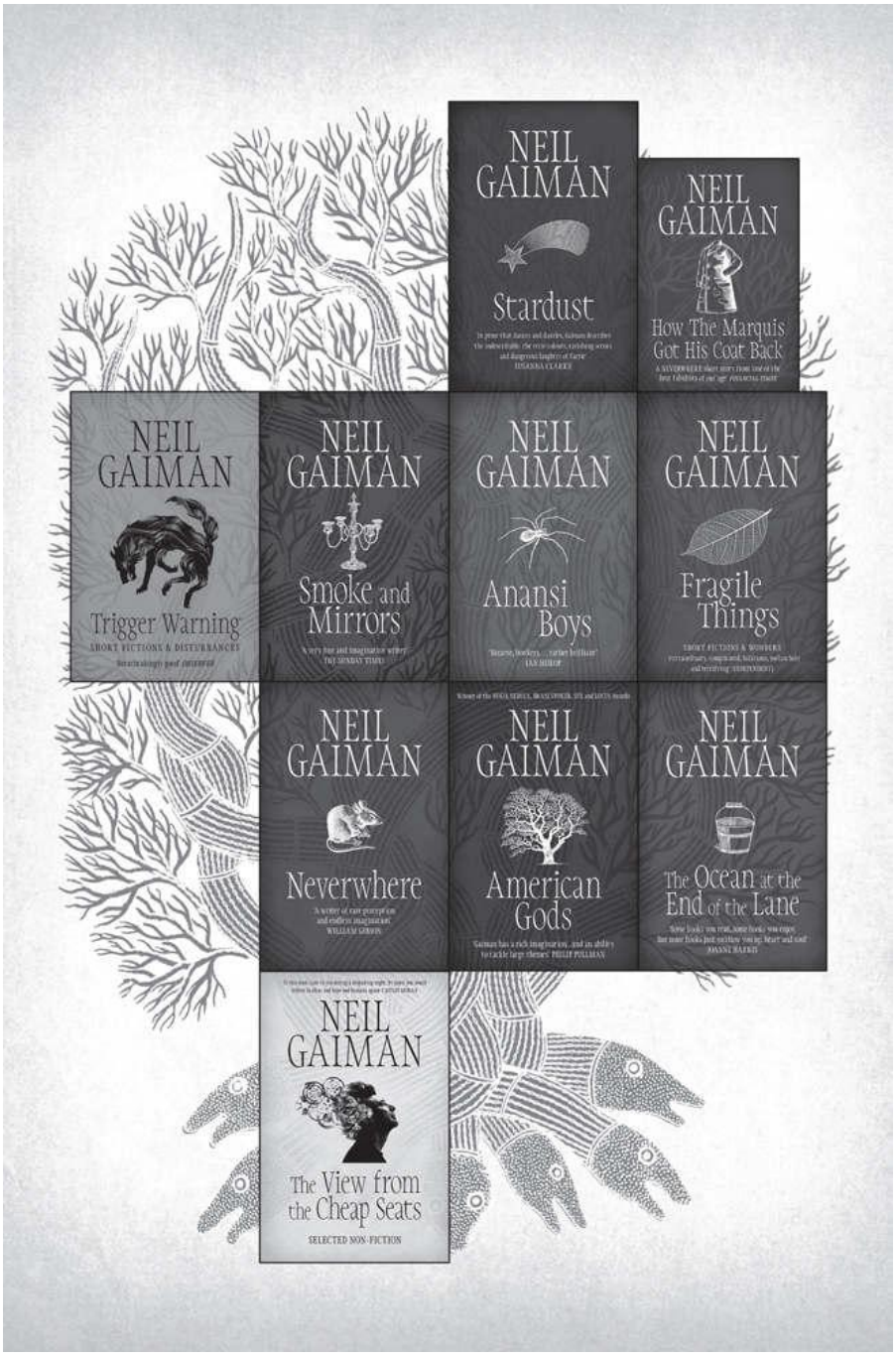

'If this book came to you during a despairing night, by dawn you would believe in ideas and hope and humans again' CAITLIN MORAN
NEIL GAIMAN
The View from the Cheap Seats
SELECTED NON-FICTION

'Literature does not occur in a vacuum. It cannot be a monologue. It has to be a conversation'

Welcome to the conversation. Neil Gaiman fled the land of journalism to find truths through storytelling and sanctuary in not needing to get all the facts right. Of course, the real world continued to make up its

own stories around him, and he has responded over the years with a wealth of ideas and introductions, dreams and speeches.

THE VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS will draw you in to these exchanges on making good art and Syrian refugees, the power of a single word and playing the kazoo with Stephen King, writing about books, comics and the imagination of friends, being sad at the Oscars and telling lies for a living. Here ‘we can meet the writer full on’ (Stephen Fry) as he opens our minds to the people he admires and the things he believes might just mean something – and makes room for us to join the conversation too.


NEIL GAIMAN
Stardust
NEIL GAIMAN
How The Marquis Got His Coat Back
NEIL GAIMAN
Trigger Warning
SHORT FICTIONS & DISTURBANCES
NEIL GAIMAN
Smoke and Mirrors
NEIL GAIMAN
Anansi Boys
NEIL GAIMAN
Fragile Things
NEIL GAIMAN
Neverwhere
NEIL GAIMAN
American Gods
NEIL GAIMAN
The Ocean at the End of the Lane
NEIL GAIMAN
The View from the Cheap Seats
SELECTED NON-FICTION